What's Going on Here…?

For a first-time visitor to an Anglican church, much of what goes on might look a little foreign. There are candles and bells, people dressed in very unusual clothing, and at certain times in the service the whole congregation moves in what appear to be practiced ways – everybody sits down and then everybody stands up and then everybody kneels. Add to this the various nods of heads, bows of torsos and apparent moving of hands around upper bodies and you have a pretty confusing mix. Let's take just a brief look at some of these "manual actions" you might come across in Anglican worship, and perhaps how one can incorporate them into ones' own experience and use.

Sit…Stand…Kneel…Hop…?

The posture of people in church is actually less random than it might seem at first. Simply stated, we stand to worship, sit to be instructed, and we kneel to pray – and when we look at it this way it doesn't seem so foreign or confusing, does it?

That being said, we will most commonly find Anglicans standing during the singing of hymns, the reciting of the Nicene Creed and the reading of the Gospel. While we are being instructed during the Gospel, we do try to give due reverence to the words of our Lord, and so attend to the reading of Divine Wisdom with awe and care. Accordingly, then, we sit during the reading of other portions of scripture and during the "homily" or "sermon", and we find ourselves kneeling during the confession of sin and the Eucharistic Prayer. Many Anglicans kneel during the "Prayer for the Whole State of Christ's Church" or "Prayers of the People". When in doubt, follow those around you, quietly ask someone near you, and in all things be guided by your own comfort and piety.

Symbolism or Swatting Flies…?

A common action undertaken by Anglican Christians is making the "Sign of the Cross" – an ancient practice that has its origins in the Baptismal rites of the early Christians. As our Christian ancestors were quite literally marked with the sign of the cross in Baptism (as Christians in our tradition still are), it became common practice to invoke the blessing and protection of Almighty God as Holy and Undivided Trinity by the merits of the Cross and Passion of Jesus Christ - the Second Person of the Trinity. Christians would and still do form the shape of the cross on their upper bodies while invoking the names of the three persons of the Godhead.

Hence, the Sign of the Cross is made by signing oneself with the right hand (often with the thumb and first two fingers held together and with the last two pressed to the palm – reminding us of both the Trinity and the two natures of Jesus Christ) on the forehead, the upper abdomen and then from one shoulder to the next while doing so "in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Upon entering the church building proper, it is common to "take holy water" – that is, to moisten one's fingers in the font or stoop of holy water and then proceed to make the sign of the cross on oneself.

The devotion of making the sign of the cross is, as stated, an ancient one, and one that the Fathers of the Church commend in various places. Holy Father St. John Chrysostom goes so far as to warn Christians against making the sign of the cross hurriedly or without paying attention to one's actions – the sign is to be made prayerfully and deliberately, and with time and practice it might easily become one of our most common devotions. In worship it is often made at the mention of the Persons of the Trinity, at the beginning of the Mass, and at the conclusion of prayers. At the introduction of the Gospel it is common to see Anglican Christians sign small crosses with their thumbs upon the brow, the lips and the breast, recalling a prayer that the Gospel of Jesus Christ might be ever in our minds, upon our lips and in our hearts.

What if I Can't Get Back Up…?

Upon entering and leaving churches, Anglican Christians tend to express their recognition of whose house that church is and to show reverence and thanksgiving to the same. In most of our churches the Blessed Sacrament (the Body of Jesus Christ in Bread from Holy Communion) is reserved for the sick and the homebound. This is often signified by a white "presence lamp" or "sanctuary candle" burning in the church near the altar. When this is the case, Anglicans will often "genuflect" to show respect. To genuflect, one bends the right knee until it touches the ground next to the left foot (think of kneeling down on one knee to pick something up from the ground). When the Blessed Sacrament is not present, as is often the case in chapels, Anglicans usually bow to the altar cross to show reverence. This is usually a "profound bow," bending from the waist. In worship it is also common for Christians to bow the head slightly at the Divine Name of Jesus. In all things, one's actions can be dictated by piety and personal comfort. One person recovering from back surgery and another with a newly-replaced knee may find it difficult (if not impossible) to perform the same actions! This is perfectly acceptable, for God knows the desires of our hearts even if our bodies cannot always perform as we wish.

When in Doubt, Ask!

Please remember that visitors are always welcome to join in our worship to the degree that they feel comfortable, and that it is nearly impossible to "make a mistake" in worship! If you have any questions that this very brief pamphlet did not cover, please know that you are very much encouraged to speak with the parish priest at the church that you are visiting. He will be very happy to help you and answer your questions as best he can. In all things regarding worship, please know that within the Anglican tradition we put the emphasis on the worship of Almighty God – it is about Him…not about us! Our mission is to make the Name of Jesus Christ known and to proclaim his saving love to all the world. "Glory be to God on High!"

St. Dunstan's Academy for
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The Diocese of Quincy
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The Things We Do When We Pray…

A brief look at some of the actions you see in church!